theories and methodologies

Criticism in the Vineyard: Twenty Years after *"Race," Writing, and Difference*

ERIC LOTT

RIFFING ON GEOFFREY HARTMAN'S *CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS*, HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., TITLED HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE 1984 COLLECtion *Black Literature and Literary Theory* "Criticism in the Jungle." Yale deconstruction, meet tropes of blackness. When a Gates-edited issue of *Critical Inquiry* (plus several additional essays) appeared two years later in book form as *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, the encounter he helped broker between poststructuralist theory and race studies had its battle cry. Race was not an essence but an inscription, a signifier of instituted difference. The literature produced under its auspices was to be read as a series of marks and markers calling for complex formal analysis, not merely as an index of the humanity or condition of its writers. In retrospect, it appears that all this was a gambit in the embourgeoisement of African American literary studies. Twenty years on, Gates has started a company that does racial DNA searches—what he calls "roots in a test tube"—and produces books and television specials on black celebrities' racial genealogies (Lee B1). No scare quotes about it, race now gives you access to Oprah and her people.[1] Call it criticism in the Vineyard.

Who would deny certain broadly fruitful results brought about in part because of Gates's efforts? The academic institutionalization of African American literature and literary scholarship; the existence of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*; the voluminous reprinting of long-lost African American literary works; even the advent of the black academic memoir—all are products of the very recent, indeed overdue, emergence of an African American professional-managerial class. Yet I don't think it's a paradox that what began for Gates as the legitimation of African American literary study by way of the canons of antiessentialist theory should have eventuated in the certification of black roots using the latest in genetic science. The recrudescence of racial biologism in the latter only suggests the cryptoessentialist imperative that all along animated *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Early and late, Gates's project has been to elevate the race in the most fashionably sophisticated forms of the day.

ERIC LOTT is professor of English and American studies at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford UP, 1993), which won, among other awards, the MLA Prize for a First Book, and *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* (Basic, 2006). He has just completed a study of white cultural formations and their uses of African American symbolic capital entitled *Black Mirror*.

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That is why for me the key moment in *"Race," Writing, and Difference* comes in its final paragraph. The volume is bookended by Gates's introduction and his closing address to certain of his critics, notably Tzvetan Todorov and Houston A. Baker, Jr. In "Caliban's Triple Play," Baker charges that for all the talk in Gates's book about racialized literary difference, the "'subtle' phonics of academic discourse" still dominate: "There is scarcely a vernacular problematic to be found" (389). To which Gates offers this revealing reply:

> No, Houston, there are no vernacular critics collected here; nor did you expect there to be. Todorov's response forces me to realize that the discursive dualism that you criticize is still urgently needed. . . . Todorov can't even hear us, Houston, when we talk *his* academic talk; how he gonna hear us if we "talk *that* talk," the talk of the black idiom? Maybe you think we should give up, but I am still an optimist. Things is just gettin' innerestin', as LeRoi says. ("Talkin'" 409)

The rather smarmy apostrophes to "Houston" (over against last-name-only bad guy Todorov) are more complicated rhetorical devices than they might appear. They erect an insider discourse that—finally—issues in the black vernacular even as it excludes black critics who are not Gates and Baker (and in the ensuing years their hegemony over the field would be a source of continuing controversy, particularly in the area of black feminist studies). This insider discourse, meanwhile, turns their conversation into one *overheard* by those outside the circle, principally white scholars; but this effect disguises the act of academic infiltration if not accommodation that Gates is transparently arguing for. The desire to be heard in "academic talk" by the likes of Todorov is straightforward. Lest this seem politically compromised, Gates invokes black-arts-era LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka—who himself, for the record, never did endorse a strategy such as Gates's. In fact, it must be said that Gates's whole project in the 1980s was to distance black literary scholarship from a liberationist, black-arts-style political agenda. Tropes of blackness, meet Yale deconstruction.

From the dedication of the volume to the Houston oil heiress–arts patron Dominique de Menil (shades of Charlotte Osgood Mason) to its closing appeal to high-theory access, *"Race," Writing, and Difference* carries an insistent undertone of getting over. No one, I think, could argue with Gates's introductory argument against African American critical neocolonialism: "I once thought it our most important gesture to *master* the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it," he famously wrote, "but I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures" ("Writing 'Race'" 13). Yet the political scope of such a turn is restricted to what Gates calls "interpretive indenture," the alternative to which lies in epistemological and textual *sophistication*—"using the most sophisticated critical theories and methods available" (14). If I insist on seeing this move as a kind of allegory of upward mobility, I think there is evidence for it. On one hand, Gates says that the idea is to develop a black critical indigeneity; on the other, he avers:

> When we attempt to appropriate, by inversion, "race" as a term for an essence—as did the negritude movement, for example ("We feel, therefore we are," as Leopold Senghor argued of the African)—we yield too much: the basis of a shared humanity. Such gestures, as Anthony Appiah observes in his essay, are futile and dangerous because of their further inscription of new and bizarre stereotypes. (13)

Indigeneity, but without essence; black tradition, but without the political crudity of negritude: what can this mean (even if it were possible) but a depoliticized "plum of black unity," as Kenneth Warren once put it (187), a sort of *Jet* politics of noncontroversial racial success, or at best a strategy of formalist

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critical elaboration and literary canon making as dodges for an explicit cultural ideology? Likewise, Gates's closing essay somehow manages both to pay fealty to European theory—we are told that the decision to put quotation marks around "race" in the volume's title came "only after an extended correspondence with Tzvetan Todorov" (402)—and, in dialogue with Baker, to hang Todorov out to dry. Gates is surely between rock and hard place here, but the conceptual contradictions are not helped by his ringing invocations in the introduction of "my own tradition," "the black vernacular tradition," "the depths of the tradition of our foreparents," and "the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other," all in the same breathtaking, section-ending sentence (15). It really is about uplifting as he writes.

Foreparents secured through theoretical niceties: this is the theme of Gates's most recent work. His PBS specials, *African American Lives* and *African American Lives 2*, engage what the *New York Times* calls "the poetry of history, the magic of science and the allure of the family trees of Morgan Freeman, Chris Rock, Tina Turner, Don Cheadle, Tom Joyner and Maya Angelou" (Lee B1). If language is no longer central to Gates's "black tradition," the vicissitudes of theory certainly are. Conducting DNA analyses once the genealogical paper trail runs out—and it runs out pretty quickly, given that slaves were recorded in census lists as chattel personal rather than people with names—Gates enters the dizzying sphere of mitochondrial and Y chromosome tests, genetic admixture tests, sample populations, the Cambridge reference sequence, haplotypes, single nucleotide polymorphisms, ancestral components, and the like, to say nothing of the perplexities of rendering the resulting "racial" mixes of a given family or person. (The triumphal moment in these searches comes when Gates announces the racial percentages—European, Native American, African—of one's makeup.) "It was a risky experiment—no one had tried this before—but it turned out to be a remarkably rewarding experience," Gates writes in *Finding Oprah's Roots* (23), deploying self-promotional tones strikingly similar to those he used to broach the heady idea of black deconstruction back in the day. Perhaps equally striking is that the payoff is just about the same, with the ideological stakes a little more explicit now. Finding Oprah's roots, it turns out, demonstrates the following: "Education and property ownership: These are the two most important aspects of Oprah's family history" (167). Making it—not, say, collective political struggle—turns you into a "hero," Gates's term for Oprah Winfrey's Reconstruction-era great-great-grandfather Constantine, who managed to acquire eighty acres of land (138). A remarkable achievement, no doubt about it, and objectively speaking a revolutionary one, since just a decade earlier Constantine had himself been property. But the political lesson for Gates lies elsewhere: "owning land was the conduit to middle-class status, because it implied economic stability and promised mobility, the mobility of subsequent generations" (73). Gates is frank about his interest in the making of the black middle class—and its celebrity exponents.[2]

Gates is on record as calling certain of his detractors "black bourgeois-bashers" (O'Hagan). I am not one of these. It is, rather, his class-bound complacency and his undialectical understanding of the class fraction E. Franklin Frazier subtly studied in *Black Bourgeoisie* that I object to; from his lofty perch, Gates has taken to extolling the merits of self-help and property acquisition as counters to structural racism in the United States: "ending discrimination, by itself, would not eradicate black poverty and dysfunction. We also need intervention to promulgate a middle-class ethic of success among the poor, while expanding opportunities for economic betterment" ("Forty Acres").[3] My point is that you could see this sensibility coming, distantly, in Gates's contributions to *"Race," Writing,*

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and Difference—even down to the unseemly be-like-me self-congratulation of such statements ("Maybe you think we should give up, but I am still an optimist"). What you could not see coming, I think, is the odd naïveté about writing itself that underpins Gates's recent genealogical investigations. Rarely has a deconstructor (even a recovering one) been so ingenuous when it comes to documents. Public records, newspaper clippings, diaries, and other forms of inscription are read wholly at face value in *Finding Oprah's Roots* and other such undertakings. It is as though there had never been a hermeneutics of suspicion. Gone, apparently, are the days when an entire riveting exchange in *"Race," Writing, and Difference* could revolve around *a single word*. The polemical heat generated by the debate between Jacques Derrida and the coauthors Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon concerning the historical shape and force of the word *apartheid* was instructive—about the law of genre (in this case, Derrida's art-catalog essay), the domain and dimensions of textuality, the division of intellectual labor, and other matters—even if it did produce an excess of seigneurial sarcasm from Derrida. Don't such pressures exist as well in the field of genealogical inquiry? Are there no ruses of representation such as those explored in Edward Said's contribution to *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, no conceptual conundrums around the perspectivalism or discursive hegemony of apparently neutral historical accounts such as those examined in the essays by Jane Tompkins, Mary Louise Pratt, and Homi K. Bhabha? Bring back the referent, all is forgiven? One is tempted to conclude that for Gates it has always been more about access than rigor: in the age of theory, the action was in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*; in the age of the "public intellectual," it was in the *New Yorker,* where Gates published the essays that made up his subsequent book, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997); these days, if you're on TV with Oprah, you've pretty much got the "middle-class ethic of success" sewed up.

There is also the matter of DNA, which is not only nowhere near as conclusive about ancestry as it is purported to be but also raises the very specter of essentialized racial identity and racial history on which *"Race," Writing, and Difference*—particularly the celebrated opening essay by Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race"—sought to put critical pressure. At times, Gates is wisely careful to observe just what DNA searches can and cannot tell us about these matters. They cannot measure race in any meaningful biological sense, only assess variation within a family or population or community; they can indicate "continental groups" or locations of ancestry but not racial phenotypes (Gates, *Finding* 147–48). In Oprah's case, moreover, Gates and his team, as he allows, identified "only one line out of the thousands of ancestors that she has—it's only her mother's mother's mother's line that mitochondrial DNA can trace" (164). And yet the impression so often conveyed, intentionally or not, is that something definitive has been done. Gates's own account of the results of Oprah's tests is partly articulated in the language of racialized percentages: "89 percent Sub-Saharan African, 8 percent native American, and 3 percent East Asian" (153). And the PBS *African American Lives* programs tend to devolve on such triumphal conclusions. A few years ago, bemused by a Penn State student's conclusion that a DNA test administered by her professor showed that she was "58 percent European and 42 percent African," Patricia J. Williams noted the way the vagaries of ancestral geographic origins (there are plenty of white people in Africa) and shifting historical definitions of race (the Irish didn't become white until fairly recently) can get boiled down into dangerous new fictions. "There is," Williams rightly observed, "a remarkable persistence in re-inscribing race onto the narrative of biological inheritance." With eerie prescience, Williams suggested that "our linguistically embedded notions of

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race seem to be on the verge of transposing themselves yet again into a context where genetic percentages act as the ciphers for culture and status, as well as economic and political attributes," perhaps one unfortunate by-product of the work Gates is doing now.

The reinscription of race onto the radical complications of biological inheritance and the reading off of strivings and status from genetics are exactly what Appiah warned against in "The Uncompleted Argument." Appiah's poignant demonstration of W. E. B. DuBois's reliance on a racial biologism that DuBois had come explicitly to reject offers a preemptive critique of the intellectual trajectory Gates has followed since editing Appiah's essay, only Gates doesn't "bury the biological conception below the surface" (34) of a sociohistorical one—he excavates it. Nor does he ask the harder questions about the ultimate value of genealogical investigation per se. Oprah, if not happy to hear that she descends in part from the Kpelle people of Liberia—she thought she was Zulu—does, she says, "feel empowered" by the news (*Finding* 164). Gates concurs; *Finding Oprah's Roots* brims with confidence about the capacity of genealogical research "to heal the rupture and the wounds of the Middle Passage" and "to stake our claim, ever more deeply, on the American tradition" (164). White boy me, I'm in no position to question any satisfaction taken from such knowledge, and it is worth observing that *Finding Oprah's Roots* is Gates's most "single-voiced" text in its address primarily to a black audience. Appiah's questions, amplifying DuBois's, linger, however:

> What use is a motherland with which your own mother's connection is "tenuous"? What does it matter that a large portion of [DuBois's] ancestors have lived on that vast continent, if there is no subtler bond with them than brute—that is, culturally unmediated—biological descent and its entailed "badge" of hair and color? (34)

Many of the animating theoretical problems addressed in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, in other words, remain live issues today; over twenty years later, the volume still has the power to instruct. The irony may only be that its editor has retreated from its more intractable puzzles. Truth to tell, maybe he let it all go a long time ago. Back in 1992, Gates was already talking "about the ways we've been betrayed by our two-decades-long love affair with theory" and distancing himself from the "routinized production of righteous indignation" by what he called the "hard left" (*Loose Canons* 186, 188, 177). (This sentiment in a book of essays that included his introduction to *"Race," Writing, and Difference*! Inconsistent? Relax.) But there are surely costs in neglecting some of the lessons of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, and Gates's career arc illustrates them. Leave aside the irony that the very thing he argued against in that volume—the hideously reductive view that black cultural activity is to be seen merely as evidence of the humanity of black people—is not that far from the incitement to document with which he is preoccupied at present. If this shift marks the return of extratextual matters seemingly repressed from his earlier literary-critical work, its new insistence on biological legacies is risky indeed. As Andrew Ross observes, the story of DNA research is predictably entangled with the goals of the criminal justice system: it is a field largely created by the FBI, its direction "wholly governed by the cliental needs of the Justice Department," the "vulnerability of its commercial and police laboratory environments" notorious and the "infallibility of its scientific claims" hotly contested (259; see also Nixon).[4] In *Bell Curve* America, genetic conceptions of personhood are bound to be dangerous, and they gibe rather nicely with rollbacks of the United States' commitments to closing racialized gaps in political and material condition.

Nor, finally, is the reactionary conception of history entailed in familial genealogy

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helpful in this respect. It radically individualizes the past even as it essentializes racial inheritance, turning up people who did or didn't work against great odds to enable their descendants a better future—and in Gates's chosen subjects, a wealthy and famous future at that. Not only does this conception tend to work against stories of collective or organized activity in the context of determinedly institutional structures, it forgets Foucault's insistence that "[h]istory is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin" (145). Once upon a time, we knew that historical inquiry uncovers "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [things] have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (142). Fabrication pays, but at what price?

Notes

1. As of this writing, Gates's most recent book is *Finding Oprah's Roots*.

2. Not for nothing is Gates attentive to this aspect of Martha's Vineyard: "Martha's Vineyard is one of the few beach resorts in the United States where black people have a long tradition of vacationing and owning property," he rightly says. See Shapiro.

3. For a blistering critique of Gates's essentialism, conservatism, and bourgeois self-satisfaction, see Reed 138–62.

4. "Bert Ely, a geneticist at the University of South Carolina, was a co-founder of the African-American DNA Roots Project in 2000, hoping to use DNA tests as a way to find connections between African-Americans and ethnic groups in Africa. 'I originally thought that the mitochondrial DNA test might be a good way for African-Americans to trace their country of origin,' Mr. Ely said. 'Now I'm coming to the opposite conclusion'" (Nixon D3).

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